

WHY SIACHEN MATTERS TO INDIA

Nitin A.Gokhale*

EDITOR'S NOTE

Nitin A. Gokhale is an outstanding journalist covering strategic affairs for over three decades. He has been unravelling the emerging contours of conflict from Indo-Myanmar borders to Af-Pak borders and has developed a pan-Himalayan perspective towards geopolitics of the Himalayas. In this paper, he examines the importance of Siachen glacier for Indian defence and provides a critique against the voices for demilitarization being espoused by a section of South Asian intelligentsia.

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INTRODUCTION

Fifteen years ago in the summer months of June and July Indian Army soldiers were doing their best to evict the Pakistani intruders from the heights of Kargil, Drass, and Batalik. It was not until 26 July 1999 that India called off Operation Vijay, after getting rid of the Pakistani intruders from the peaks that overlooked a crucial highway connecting the rest of India to Ladakh.

Over the years many strategic thinkers have analysed why Gen Pervez Musharraf chose to launch the Kargil misadventure and have come up with various explanations. To me, the most compelling reason Pakistan's then military ruler had in mind for this 1999 misadventure was the objective to cut off Ladakh from rest of India and thereby force withdrawal of the Indian Army from the Saltoro ridge which sits astride the Siachen glacier.

Pakistan has never been able to reconcile to the fact that the Indian Army raced to the top of the Saltoro ridge and occupied three of its important passes. This loss, in the eyes of the Pakistani Army is second only to its military defeat in 1971. Pervez Musharraf, as a brigadier had tried--unsuccessfully--to wrest Indian positions but had failed miserably.

In April 2012, Pakistan's then Army Chief Ashfaq Pervez Kayani suddenly called for demilitarisation of the Siachen glacier for the "development of Pakistan and environmental reasons." "*India and Pakistan must live in peaceful coexistence as defence without development is neither viable nor acceptable,*" he declared. He saw all issues dividing India and Pakistan as capable of resolution and Siachen and Sir Creek, as convenient starting points, low hanging fruits to be plucked as strong confidence building measures.

This was completely out of character and a major departure from Pakistan's position on the Siachen glacier.

BEGINNING OF THE RACE TO GLACIER

Actually it was the tragic death of 130 troops of the 6 Northern Light Infantry in a massive avalanche at Gayari on 7 April, 2012 which triggered Gen Kayani's new thought process. After visiting the site of the accident, Gen Kalyani spoke at Skardu about the need to demilitarise Siachen. He said Pakistan was not manning those treacherous heights out of choice. "*The world knows why we are in Siachen,*" reiterating Pakistani position that it was India which started the dispute in 1984.

* **Nitin A. Gokhale** is the author of acclaimed work, *Beyond NJ 9842: The Siachen Saga* (2014). He is the Defence Editor at NDTV news channel, India and active in the field of journalism covering strategic issues for last three decades.

But even while announcing the desire to make peace with India on 'Siachen and Sir Creek', Gen Kayani was economical with the truth. The ground reality is that Pakistani troops are nowhere near the Siachen glacier. Their deployment is on the western slopes of the Saltoro ridge, far away from the glacier and at much lower altitudes.

Indian positions on the other hand are on absolutely dominating heights on the main passes of the Saltoro ridge, Sia La and Bilafond La. As far as Indian Army is concerned, it sees no need to withdraw from the commanding heights it controls given Pakistan's perfidy in the past, especially in Kargil when it tried to cut-off Siachen in the summer of 1999.

Three months after Gen Kayani made the offer to demilitarise Siachen, I was in Kargil, west of Siachen and at a much lower altitude along the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan. Every year on 26 July, the Indian Army celebrates its victory here. Having reported on the area for 45 days during the 1999 conflict, I try and visit Kargil every year to participate in the function that pays tribute to the 500 plus soldiers who died fighting the Pakistani intruders and eventually evicting them.

But in 2012, I had one more task at hand. I wanted to formally interview for NDTV, the channel I work for, Lt Gen KT Parnaik, a highly respected general and then India's Northern Army Commander.

The Northern Command, Indian Army's operationally most active command, has the unique task of guarding India's vast land borders with both China and Pakistan. Its responsibility stretches from the forbidding heights of Karakoram down to the plains of Jammu. Moreover, it has been involved in counter-insurgency operations against the infiltrating terrorists from Pakistan in the state of Jammu & Kashmir continuously for over a quarter century now. Of particular interest to me in 2012 however was Northern Command's reaction to Gen Kayani's rather unexpected call to try and 'resolve' Siachen.

As we sat down to record the interview, I worked through the usual questions about the threat posed by terrorists, the fragile peace in the Kashmir Valley and the deployment along the LoC. But I was actually itching to seek his answer on the Siachen issue. Finally I asked him: What is it that Indian Army is concerned about with respect to Siachen? His answer, later circulated widely, put paid to any hopes Pakistan may have had in India agreeing to demilitarise the Siachen glacier area. Gen Parnaik said:

"You see, to understand Siachen, I think one needs to be geographically oriented to the region. And let me simply put it, because I'm telling you without a map, that the Siachen Glacier is bounded to the west by the Saltoro Range, which is a very high range and to the east by the Karakoram Range and the Nubra River. So, per se Siachen Glacier is a sort of iced river, which flows in between them. The Saltoro Range actually provides domination of the entire area... There is a strategic implication of the Saltoro Range and the implication is you have the Pakistanis sitting in the northern areas, which we keep saying is an illegally occupied, it's a Pakistan occupied Kashmir. Now out of the other areas that they have occupied, they have illegally ceded the Shaksgam Valley to the Chinese. Shaksgam Valley lies to the north of the glacier. And if Saltoro Range was held by the (Pakistanis), it practically enables them to bridge this Aksai Chin and northern areas gap, which is with China, and also exercise complete control over the Karakoram Pass. Therefore, strategically, it is an important area. And we feel, by holding these areas, we would effectively deny approaches to Kargil and Leh. Now, in security parlance, for the country it is of strategic importance. That is one reason. Second reason is that we have had a number of rounds of talks on this. A large number of solutions have been offered. One of the biggest issues that has not been resolved yet is that we insist that for anything to happen in Siachen, the Pakistanis must first accept the actual line of ground position and delineate the line along the positions that are being held by the troops today, both theirs and ours, as is, where is. They do not seem to be amenable to this sort of a thing. They continue to say that we should go back to 1971 and 1953, when this whole area was not demarcated, so you should vacate it. Don't forget, Kargil happened because of Siachen... If you peruse their own records, which are now public, one of the major objectives of what they did in Kargil was to force us to vacate the Siachen glacier. Now if that is their intent and that is their credibility, it is up to you to judge whether we should be really vacating the glacier or not.

As a follow up, my next question was: Does the Government understand these strategic implications?

Gen Parnaik said emphatically: *See, the offer that was made by the Pakistan Army Chief, probably in wake of the tragedy that took place in Gayari. If they find it difficult (to remain there) they are most welcome to withdraw to safe places. And let me assure you, the Indian Army has no evil designs to set across for those areas and capture those territories. This aspect is also well known to our leaders. So that is where it rests."*

In one short, swift answer, Gen Parnaik had demolished the case that was sought to be built by Gen Kayani that *both* India and Pakistan need to withdraw from Siachen! He was only reiterating what successive Army Chiefs and Northern Army Commanders have stated.

Over the past three decades, the Indian Army ably supported by the Indian Air Force has mastered the treacherous mountains and has evolved a *high altitude doctrine* that is the envy of the world. In the process, the Indian military has shed blood, made enormous sacrifices and braved the elements. No wonder, the military leadership has told the political executive time and again that it is against any withdrawal from the Saltoro ridge and Siachen glacier.

WHY DOES SIACHEN MATTER TO INDIA?

At the heart of the problem is the interpretation of the 1949 Karachi and 1972 Shimla agreements by both sides. During both these negotiations, India and Pakistan demarcated their borders only up to Point NJ 9842. This includes the 772 km Ceasefire Line in 1949, now known as the LoC or Line-of-Control. It was stated in the agreements that the border would run "thence north" from map grid reference NJ 9842.

The Cease-Fire Agreement was signed in Karachi by top military representatives of India and Pakistan and the UN Military Observer Group. The purpose of the Karachi meeting (July 18 to 27) was to establish "a ceasefire line in the State of J&K" in pursuance of Part I of the key UN resolution of August 13, 1948 that prescribed a ceasefire. Present at the Karachi Conference were members of the Truce Committee of the UN Commission for India and Pakistan, Hernando Semper of Colombia (Chairman), William L.S. Williams (U.S), Lt-Gen Maurice Delvoie, Military Adviser; and Miguel A. Martin (Legal Adviser). Pakistan was represented by Maj. Gen W.J. Cawthorn, Maj. Gen Nazir Ahmad, Brigadier Sher Khan and a couple of observers. Representing India were Lt. Gen S.M Shrinagesh, Maj. Gen K.S. Thimayya and Brigadier Sam Manekshaw, with H.M Patel and Vishnu Sahay as observers.

The Karachi Agreement delineated the entire CFL, demarcating over 740 km on the ground. With the CFL increasingly running through high mountains and glaciated areas as it traversed north, it often followed a directional path in the absence of clear landmarks. Thus, finally, "Chalunka(on the Shyok River), Khor, thence North to the glaciers," passing through grid reference NJ 9842. The segment beyond NJ 9842 was by mutual agreement not demarcated on the ground, being a highly elevated, glaciated, unexplored and unpopulated region that had not witnessed any fighting. A plebiscite was soon to follow and the matter, it was assumed, would soon be settled.

The delineation of the northern-most segment of the CFL was, however, unambiguous: NJ 9842, "thence north to the glaciers". If every one of 30 or more earlier directional commands were meticulously followed in tracing the CFL, there was no reason whatsoever for any departure from this norm in the case of the very last command. "Thence North", could only mean due north to wherever the boundary of J&K State lay. The very next section crucially directed that "the ceasefire line described above" be drawn "so as to eliminate any no man's land". Therefore, the Line, whether delineated or demarcated could in no way be left hanging in the air.

The Cease Fire Line was ratified by both sides. Twenty-three years later, it was revalidated as the Line of Control by the Suchetgarh Agreement of December 1972, in the wake of the Shimla Agreement between Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Both sides also agreed in the LoC, the military gains made by either side in J&K in the 1971 war. Thus in the Kargil-Siachen sector, all territorial gains went entirely to India which acquired the Turtuk comprising five villages (Chalunka, Thang, Tyakshi, Pharol and Turtok) just south and west of NJ 9842. This modest but important military acquisition provided India an additional territorial bulwark against hostile cartographic or physical claims on Siachen.

While India interprets this to mean due north (along the ridge line, as is the international convention), leading to the northern tip of the Saltoro ridge known as Indira Col., Pakistan claims that the line should run northeast towards the Karakoram Pass which leads into Tibet.

As many officers who have served on the glacier and in the Northern Command have pointed out time and again, occupation of the Saltoro and Siachen provides a buffer to Ladakh and in military parlance, the much needed depth to important mountain passes that are gateways to Ladakh and onto Kashmir. There are other reasons too why Siachen or Saltoro to be more precise cannot be vacated. For instance:

- It will enable widening of the China-Pakistan handshake (collusive threat) to include Gilgit-Baltistan (reportedly being leased out by Pakistan to China for 50 years), Shaksgam Valley (already ceded by Pakistan to China in 1963), Saltoro-Siachen region (that Pakistan may reoccupy through "Kashmiri Freedom Fighters" or cede to China),

own Sub Sector North (SSN) east of Siachen with Chinese sitting on the northern slopes of the Karakoram Pass if not on top of it already, and Aksai Chin already under Chinese occupation.

- SSN and Eastern Ladakh will become focused objectives of Chinese strategic «acupuncture». Defence potential of SSN will be totally degraded with western flank exposed and KK Pass to north, which India stopped patrolling years back for fear of annoying the dragon. We continue to remain thin in Eastern Ladakh against Chinese threat via Aksai Chin – heightened more now with possibility of two front war.
- India's next line of defence will perforce base on Ladakh Range with possibility of Leh coming within enemy artillery range.
- Ladakh and Zaskar Ranges will be targeted for terrorism by ISI nurtured groups while Pakistan will say they are 'out of control'.

There are however, a number of 'experts' who argue that it is futile to hold on to the positions on the Salto ridge line because they are important only tactically and have no strategic significance. As one Indian Army officer has written: "They are obviously unaware of the prevailing conditions in Siachen. If ever there was a tactical gain that was instrumental in providing exponential dividend to a strategic cause, this is the one."

Through innovation, hard work and sustained effort to improve the situation, the Indian Army has established such strong, controlling position that it enjoys overwhelming operational and psychological superiority in Siachen. It would be a folly to give up the advantage. Self-proclaimed analysts have put forward arguments in favour of demilitarising Siachen citing the high human and material cost that the Indian military has to pay.

Let us examine the costs. Between 1984 and 2007, the Parliament was told that 884 Indian soldiers were killed and 13,022 wounded. That makes it an average of 38 dead in a year and 550 plus wounded. But the figures don't reflect the fact that since the ceasefire agreement between India and Pakistan went into effect in 2003, battle casualties are down to zero. Even the weather casualties are now down to single digit on an average in a year. This is a sea change from the first two decades of the conflict when the weather and battle casualties both were high.

Financially, India has reportedly spent over Rs 8,000 crores since 1984 in *Operation Meghdoot*. The recurring costs today are pegged at about Rs 365 crores. This is no financial burden for a military that has an annual budget of Rs 2, 24,000 crore or about 38 billion dollars (2014).

Infrastructure in the Siachen sector has developed over the years. Pipelines for kerosene and water have been laid and better facilities have been organised in every sphere of activity. Therefore, the expenditure incurred now is more in the form of maintenance and regular improvements. Over the years, the improvement in living conditions, health facilities and communication have reduced the attrition rate significantly. Today, financial and human costs in *Operation Meghdoot* are sustainable.

DEMILITARIZATION: PRELUDE TO PEACENIK'S IDEA OF PEACE PEAK?

In view of Siachen being strategically important for India's northern parts, why is there fresh clamour for demilitarising Siachen? More importantly, can it be done? Several experts have weighed in on the issue and as in every other issue concerning India and Pakistan; the opinion is divided right down the middle.

De-militarisation by itself is a process that consists of several logical steps: ceasefire, authentication, demarcation, withdrawal, re-deployment and verification. This concept, everyone agrees, is the best possible solution. But, why is there no forward movement?

The primary cause of disconnect is the sequence of the process of de-militarisation. India insists on authentication of current troops' position as the first step. The Pakistanis want the Indian troops to withdraw to pre-1972 positions before any further discussions can take place.

Then there is the question of trust.

What if the agreement is flouted and the positions are occupied by the Pakistan Army? The level of mistrust between India and Pakistan in general, and the Indian and Pakistani Security Forces in particular is deep-rooted and cannot be overturned so easily.

Yet there are many 'peaceniks' who propose a unilateral withdrawal from Siachen, among them military officers who professed to be hawks while in service but who turned doves when out of it.

Several diplomats and analysts have said India must recognise Pakistan's compulsions and offer a face-saving formula so that the agreement on Siachen does not look like a defeat for the Pakistani Army. This is utter nonsense. If Pakistan wants demilitarisation of Salto-ro-Siachen, it must first accept the fact that Pakistani Army troops are *NOWHERE NEAR THE SIACHEN GLACIER*.

More pragmatic military leaders like retired Lt Gen RK Nanavatty have suggested a practical formula. He says: "India's approach towards a final settlement should be based on demilitarisation of limited and well-defined mutually agreed prescribed area." Essential steps for this, he says begin with a political agreement followed by a formal ceasefire, delimitation, demarcation, disengagement, redeployment and verification. "The bottom-line", according to General Nanavatty, "is that any peaceful resolution of Indo-Pakistan disputes is possible only when the two countries cease to view each other as military adversaries."

Officially too, India and Pakistan continue to hold dialogue over Siachen. Between 1986 and 2012, 13 rounds of talks have been held. Twice, past reports suggest, both countries came close to an agreement but political considerations rather than military compulsions prevented any final breakthrough. As Gen Raghavan said a decade ago: "The assumption that demilitarisation is being hampered by military obduracy is, of course a misplaced one. The record of negotiations (between 1986 and 2003) on Siachen is evidence enough of the political problems in bringing about demilitarisation."

FLUTTERING TRICOLOUR ATOP SIACHEN

The civilian leadership in India has so far backed the military's stand. To give up a dominant military position on Siachen without iron-clad guarantees from a revanchist enemy would be a fool's errand especially in view of the enormous sacrifices and hardships that the Indian soldiers have braved in these past three decades to defend Siachen and to keep the Indian flag flying.